Airing dirty laundry or nursing caste?

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tion in Western Ukraine, for instance—and some of its key actors have shown a talent for nationalist populism equal to that of Le Pen or Haider—the EU might be envisioned as a grand savior rather than the grand villain. In Hungary, on the other hand, EU-imposed budget cuts that the Socialist government under Gyurcsany sought to implement have figured as yet another reason that far-Right demagogues have used to stir up the crowds during the violent riots that occurred in Budapest over the last year.

Bringing Western neonationalist EU fatigue in one line of comparison with the EU enthusiasm or loathing that can be found among some nationalists further East is certainly a direction that one might hope anthropologists interested in the subject would be willing to undertake in the not-too-distant future. *Neo-nationalism in Europe and beyond* is surely a good starting point for anthropological research into the subject matter at hand.

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Sheba Mariam George, When women come first: Gender and class in transnational migration. Berkeley and Los Angeles and London: University of California Press. 2005, ISBN 978-0-520-24319-4.

Sheba George analyzes the gender dynamics of the migration of female Christian nurses and their families from Kerala to the U.S. and does so from a challenging position: her own mother was a migrant nurse to the U.S., followed by her husband and children, among whom was the then twelve-year-old Sheba George. This makes the author into a "1.5er" (p. 11), neither a first- nor a second-generation migrant, but nevertheless part of the community she researches. This makes her vulnerable to the criticism that through her research she is airing her community's "dirty laundry" (p. 16). The author is nevertheless courageous enough to expose the sometimes indeed perverse gender and class dynamics involved in the migration pattern she studies, particularly when it comes to the transnationally reinforced stigma from Kerala against nurses as being dirty and sexually loose. The author is more hesitant, however, in pointing to the transnational *caste* rather than merely gender or class stigma against nurses—so much so that in not airing dirty laundry on the subject of caste, she may end up nursing caste, leaving its latent—but forceful—presence relatively unexposed. Let us first look, however, at the substance of George's well-developed argument on transnational gender and class dynamics.

George's builds on an adaptation of R.W. Connell's theory on how the gender order of a given society is determined by the relationship between either complementary, conflictive, or parallel "gender spheres," which in George's case study are "Work" (ch. 2), "Home" (ch. 3), and "Community" (ch. 4). She finds that whereas Keralese female nurses in the U.S. gain greater independence through their work and therefore come to a position where they can question gender and class norms, their husbands usually experience the antithesis of this: unemployment and loss of status. This challenge to conventional gender relations is negotiated in different ways in the twenty-seven households the author researches. In what she categorizes as "forced participation households" couples try to uphold the traditional gender ideology even though women have become the primary breadwinners and even though "men are forced to get their hands dirty

in doing child care instead of doling out doses of patriarchal discipline from a symbolic distance" (p. 98). To uphold the gender ideology, women then overcompensate for their husbands' loss of masculine status by continuing to do all the cooking and claiming ignorance in financial matters. In "partnership households," on the other hand, gender ideology and practice are less tenuous as the gender ideology adopted by both men and women is more egalitarian. The difference may be explained by the relatively weaker transnational ties, in the form of help from relatives from Kerala, that George finds among partnership households when compared to forced participation households.

When it comes to couples' community activities, particularly their involvement in the church, George observes that the husbands of nurse immigrants (often with the "self-patrolling consent" of their wives) try to compensate for their loss of status by redefining all functions in the church as male prerogatives. Changes in the gender sphere of work are not, however, so easily balanced out in the community sphere: the former ends up undermining the latter because the men asserting male privilege within the church come to be seen as doing so to compensate for the degrading fact of being married to a nurse—thus the stigma of these men being emasculated and "lower class" remains. The long-term effects are potentially even more undermining as the impetus to expand male participation in the church is at odds with the aims of transmitting Indian culture and retaining the second generation in the church.

George's most interesting reworking of Connell's framework comes in chapter 5, where she considers how transnational connections to the sending community affect the gender order. Whereas in the "liberatory moment" (p. 196) transnational connections allow for the creation of a new space where traditional social norms can be renegotiated, the discourse in the transnational marriage market that equates nursing with pollution and sexual looseness and the reinforcement in the U.S. of the traditional gender norms of an imagined Kerala are evidence of the "repressive moments" of transnational connections.

It is particularly in chapter 5 that one notices the influence of Michael Burawoy and his extended case method. It is also here, however, that one realizes the importance of explicitly including a critique of methodological nationalism, for instance along the lines of Nina Glick-Schiller's work, in the extended case method. This could have avoided a single focus on the nationality of the immigrants and the national context where they settle and would have encouraged the author to pay more attention to, for example, the relations between the immigrants and the place where they settled, that is, in this case a metropolitan area in the U.S. that the reader learns rather little about and which is given the alias of "Central City."

Unfortunately, moreover, even the *national* U.S. context is largely taken for granted by George. She could have examined this context in a more precise comparative manner and would thereby have probably refrained from claims that the negative experiences of the husbands of nurses are a symptom of the "insecurity and the absence of safety nets that is *inherent* in a postindustrial capitalist society" (p. 76: emphasis added). Surely it matters whether migrants settle in a society that is as devoid of public social welfare as the U.S., or whether they settle in a country that can plausibly call itself a welfare state. Dependence on the extended family, moreover, is not the *only* alternative to the kind of absence of public care as found in the U.S.

The other point I disagree with is the author's systematic use of "class" in situations where I would think "caste" is a more revealing concept. For example, she discusses how nurses' ability to earn income and migrate to different parts of the world made them desirable marriage partners "even across *class* lines" (p. 75, emphasis added) and how this desirability is offset on the other hand by what she calls the "gender- and *class*-based stigmas against nurses" (p. 185, emphasis added) in Kerala: the fact that nursing is seen as dirty work and often associated with sexual looseness, to such an extent that even

a nurse's siblings and children can experience difficulty in finding a marriage partner because of the stigma attached to nursing (pp. 179–185). The author herself points out that "most Keralite Syrian Christians choose to separate themselves from the 'lower castes' by claiming that they are directly descended from the Brahmin caste, although Christian theology does not allow for internal caste differentiation" (p. 152). This is, however, the only page where caste is mentioned. Does the author assume that caste dynamics stop functioning and become mere class dynamics as soon as migrant groups enter the U.S. context—that is, did some degree of methodological nationalism blind the author to the existence of caste outside of India? Or is the author *too* acutely aware of the fact that members within her community could see her project as involving "dirty laundry that should not be aired in the sight of outsiders" (p. 16)? In not using caste as an analytical category the author in any case runs the risk of nursing transnational caste dynamics.

This could be overcome by treating caste not as an emic category, which indeed George's informants avoid mentioning, but as a critical analytical category. As such it points to the relational dynamics of hierarchically ordered endogamous groups, and their concomitant patrolling of female sexuality, surrounded by notions of purity and pollution. This relational dynamic can then be found not *just* among those few Hindu groups who still explicitly celebrate caste as being part their religion but also among communities in India that are more "politically correct" about caste (e.g., secular Hindus, Communists, Christians, or Muslims) that nevertheless in private very much take part in such a dynamic. In this analytical sense, caste can be found, moreover, not only in the Indian subcontinent but also among certain groups outside it.

"Caste" in this sense would be a more precise and revealing term than "class" to describe the relational dynamics involved in the stigma of nursing among Keralite Christian groups. This is not to say that "caste" dynamics may not transform into class dynamics at a certain point, for example, among second- or third-generation Indian migrants to the U.S. or under the influence of significant social transformations in India itself. As long as the nursing stigma is, however, still so clearly linked to an explicitly endogamous transnational marriage market preoccupied with hierarchical orderings on the basis of purity and pollution, it cannot be assumed that caste dynamics become mere class dynamics as soon as people start living in a different place or as soon as caste is no longer publicly mentioned.

Nevertheless, when it comes to the author's understanding of the shifts in gender relations that come with transnational migration, her analysis is courageous and convincing. Her argument, because of the analytical framework and the language used, is moreover clear and thorough as well as stimulating of further thinking on the topic.

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